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1899

Alaska

A Sketch

of the

Hydah

Mission.



53 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK.

Sketch of the Hydah Mission

On the southern part of Prince of Wales island, one of the many islands bordering the south eastern coast of Alaska, lives the native tribe of the Hydah. They are described as a large, well formed and handsome race, with lighter complexion than the other tribes. Their barbarity in war gained for them the appellation of the "Bulldogs" of the North Pacific, and they stand among the other tribes the recognized victors of battles, which were at one time frequent, but happily began to disappear when civilization commenced its work of reformation. That the commercial interests of an uncivilized and unchristian community are enhanced by the advent of missionaries, who teach by precept and example the principles of honesty and integrity, is strikingly shown among them. Before the influences of Christianity began to permeate the village, English and American ships were seized and robbed. At one time the captain and crew of a vessel were held as prisoners until ransomed by the Hudson Bay Fur Company.

Their villages are noted for the large number of totem poles, representing the tribal genealogy, and

are often seen standing at either side of the entrance of the house, one pole heralding the husband's ancestry and the other the wife's. They are sometimes used as the sepulcher for the ashes of dead chiefs who have been cremated after death. Again they are made to serve as an entrance to the house by making an oval opening through one of the large poles. They vary in size from one to two feet in diameter and twenty to sixty feet in height. One who has visited their houses describes one of the homes as "a large, low, plank building, from forty to fifty feet square, with a fireplace in the centre of the floor, and a large opening in the roof for the escape of smoke." The Hydah are skilled in carving, their ornaments and utensils of bone and wood, stone, silver and gold being famous.

While making his tour of inspection along the coast in 1877, Dr. Jackson spent some time on this island. The natives eagerly asked that a teacher might be sent to them. A mission was established in 1881, with Mr. James E. Chapman as teacher, at Howcan, since named Jackson by the missionaries, in compliment to Dr. Jackson, who has so vigorously worked for the redemption of the Alaskans. Rev. J. L. Gould was sent as a missionary the following year. He found a chief ready to open a large house for church and school purposes.

In the beginning everybody attended, as the Alaskans with no record of ages are slow to understand why the older men and women are not

able to learn as rapidly as the children. Fascinated by the intelligence and ability of the missionaries they were eager to be like them. It is not an unusual sight, odd as it may seem to us, to see a little one strapped to a board, in its mother's arms, or lying on the floor in a blanket, while the mother is reciting her lesson.

The first two years were full of frontier experiences, for the missionaries who were disappointed in procuring lumber for building purposes, but with true pioneer ingenuity they went to the forests, felled trees and constructed with poles, shakes and puncheons, buildings for the church and school, also a dwelling.

In the autumn of 1886 Mrs. A. R. McFarland, that brave hearted woman who was the first missionary to Alaska, and courageously began the first work alone at Fort Wrangel, went to Jackson to establish a "Home for boys and girls." No time was lost in again bringing into play the acquired skill of the carpenter, and necessary buildings were soon made ready for this department. A disastrous fire three years later robbed the mission of this much-needed home. The thirty girls from it were sheltered in the carpenter shop, which for two years shielded them. With accustomed rapidity the ministerial mechanic was again busily engaged at the trade the Master honored by following himself. The fast-approaching Alaskan winter hurried the workers on lest the faithful pastor and his family might be found unprovided for it. The Home was again



HYDAH WAR CANOE.

rebuilt, but sore was the disappointment when it became evident that for lack of sufficient funds to maintain it admission must be denied the boys. A promising class of girls was rapidly developing into womanhood, but still the work was only half done. Generous friends soon came forward and gave money for the enlargement of the work, thereby making it possible to admit the neglected boys. Now they receive with these sisters spiritual, mental and industrial training. The tourists who throng Alaska in summer, carrying cheer and help to other mission stations, thereby breaking the monotony and giving the missionaries a glimpse of the outside world, never startle our faithful *coterie* at Jackson. The Prince of Wales island is one hundred and fifty miles from the main coast and two hundred miles from the direct steamer course. Once or twice a year provisions are sent on a steamer, but all other communication is made by means of native canoes. The sight of the mail carrier, which sends a thrill throughout one's body as he stands with outstretched hand holding the long-looked-for letter, is a pleasure never granted Hydah missionaries, for their letters must lay over at Fort Wrangel to await the native carrier who goes for them by canoe. This is a trip which entails spending many nights on land and "beaching the boat," as it is called. Severe snow and hail storms are often encountered, which makes letter carrying there not the pleasurable task letter reading is. All these hardships and inconveniences which the missionaries endure are

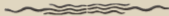
cheerfully borne for the privilege of telling to the people about them "the old, old story of Jesus and his love." The joy of such a service is told by Mr. Gould who says: "We have seen some put off the blanket for civilized garb, get out of the herd in the 'lodge' for a cottage and family Christian home; break away from the chief's rule and assert American individuality; turn from the tricks and incantations of witches and 'Shamans,' and abandon superstition for belief. Debauchery has at Hydah given place to teetotalism."

The changes which have come about have not been the result of any rapid progress or sudden overthrow of old customs and habits. The power of a consistent life among the natives has shown them the result of accepting the gospel. They have watched the missionaries; have observed their daily lives and seen wherein they could be like them. A marked change has come about in the marriages, which of old were often very unsuitable. A young man would marry a woman old enough to be his grandmother, while girls would take husbands of three score years, these being questions which were settled by tribal customs; but now the missionaries are frequently asked to give advice, and gradually matches have become more natural. The old communal houses have given way to neat cottages where the home life is held to be sacred. The influence of the young people is being felt among the old, who have been hard to reach. Now, however, they are coming to church and are eager listeners.

One old chief who was formerly satisfied to have his wife and children go to school and church, has now become a regular attendant at the Sabbath services and week night prayer meeting, and has said: "Every day a little more light is coming, and by and by I think I will be strong to stand up and let my people know my heart."

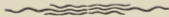
Chief Skult-kah, who so willingly gave his house for the use of the mission when it was established, and was always its loyal friend, has recently died. He was among the first to be baptized, and during his lingering illness from consumption gave evidence of the sincerity of the profession he made.

The good work goes on encouragingly at this promising point, and as we enlarge the contributions, proportionately can it be advanced. The ready co-operation of all is needed that the progress may not be retarded, but more marked in the future than it has been in the past. The fields are "already white to the harvest," and shall we not thrust the sickle in and gather the ripened grain?



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